Better deals now available for PC clones

PRICES ARE FALLING and users are cheering. For the first time since the IBM PC was introduced in 1981, almost all computer manufacturers who are seriously addressing the same market as the PC — the business market for personal computers, as opposed to home computers — are doing so with PC clones. As a result, "generic PCs" have become a commodity and prices are falling through the floor.

This was made possible by a single, rather amazing development. After many years of trying, a company called Phoenix Software Associates was able to exactly duplicate the operation of a crucial part of the internal software of the IBM PC — called the ROM BIOS — without violating the copyrights. They then proceeded to license the software to almost all of IBM's competitors, allowing the competitors to produce machines that run all the same applications software as the IBM version.

Predictably, as soon as the PC clones began to appear, and compete with one another, prices began to fall. Today, even the *list prices* for the competitive machines reflect big savings over similarly configured IBM machines, without taking into consideration additional discounts offered by many dealers.

Popular models

Three models of the IBM PC family of products have become prominent and widely used for business purposes:

✔ The PC, usually sold with 256K of memory and two 360K floppy disk drives — list price $2,885.

✔ The PC-XT (called the XT for short), commonly provided with 512K of memory, one built-in 10MB hard disk and one 360K floppy disk drive — list price $4,974, and

✔ The PC-AT (called the AT), a faster ma-

chine often configured with 640K of memory, one 20MB hard disk, one 1.2MB floppy disk drive and one 360K floppy disk drive — list $7,160.

Of the three IBM machines that have become prominent, the best buy today is the XT. Because it is being upstaged by the newer and faster AT, it's being discounted heavily. Furthermore, if you're willing to buy third-party accelerator boards and special software that speeds up the machine, AT-like performance is actually possible.

When you are willing to emulate the XT with a work-alike machine, the reasons to go with an XT clone are even greater. Not only are the XT clones selling for less than ever before (since they are being upstaged by the AT clones), but their performance is often better than the equivalent IBM XT model.

LIST PRICE COMPARISON (percent of XT price in parentheses):

IBM $4,974 (100%); AT&T $5,314 (107%); Compaq $4,849 (97%); Corona $2,705 (54%); Epson $2,642 (53%); Leading Edge $1,995 (40%); NCR $4,418 (89%); Tandy $2,729 (55%) and Zenith $4,127 (83%). (Note: The Epson and Zenith machines include a 20 MB hard drive instead of 10 MB.)

In making cost comparisons between IBM and other manufacturers, I found that list prices were most often given for slightly different configurations. Naturally, this makes direct comparisons difficult unless you're willing to factor in the differences. In the comparison above, I was careful to make sure that the prices reflect the same XT configuration, except as noted.

Suggested strategy

Every business is different and has different needs, so it's not easy to give general advice that fits all situations. In today's environment, however, you'd be safe to consider:

✔ First of all, with the current low prices for IBM XTs and XT clones, now is an economical time to expand computerization within your organization. Be sure to consider the following areas if they are not yet automated: word processing, accounting (general ledger, order entry, accounts receivable and payable), financial projections and inventory control.

✔ In most cases, it's best to buy IBM gear for your first hardware purchase. Then, you may wish to take advantage of PC clones for subsequent machines. In this way, if a program or peripheral ever fails to run as expected, you can try it out on your IBM machine to see if the problem is related to compatibility. Without having an IBM machine handy for this purpose, using supposedly IBM compatible software with supposedly IBM compatible hardware could be tricky — when problems arise (as they always do) it will be difficult and unduly time-consuming to diagnose.

THE BOTTOM LINE: Now is a good time to take advantage of the low prices for IBM XT work-alike machines. Be aware, however, that aside from configuration similarities and the ability to run the same software, other differences still exist between these machines and the level of local service you'll receive from different computer dealers. Before making a choice, be sure to consider keyboard quality, screen resolution, expansion capability, speed — and, of course, dealer support and service.

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